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ABSTRACT

The Thompson Attitude Survey (TAS) was developed as a diagnostic tool to help teachers identify students with writing anxiety. Based upon the premise that writing anxiety is a fear of the writing process which outweighs the projected gain from the ability to write, the TAS is comprised of statements about the writing process and its consequences which students evaluate on a Likert-type scale. The use of this test, at the beginning and end of freshman composition courses, has helped to identify specific classroom strategies that alleviate writing anxiety. One such strategy concentrates on the writing process by teaching students to violate the blank page, use a "magic pen," write something, then edit, organize, write a thesis sentence, fill in details, write a concluding sentence, and polish. Another strategy focuses on the professional author's writing habits and problems and encourages students to compare their writing process to that of the professional and the instructor. A third instructional approach which reduces anxiety introduces students to language development, showing them that language is not static and how rules for grammar, spelling, and pronunciation developed. Finally, student-teacher interviews can reduce anxiety if the instructor provides encouragement and suggestions as well as criticism. (AYC)

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CLASSROOM TECHNIQUES FOR REDUCING WRITING ANXIETY: A STUDY OF SEVERAL CASES.

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Anxiety is evasive, hard to track down, to grab, quantify, qualify, label, and therefore to handle. So is Writing Anxiety.

Writing Anxiety has been defined variously: by Daly and Miller as a specific case of general communication apprehension in real or imagined communication situations;[1] by Lynn Bloom as analogous to Math Anxiety, a cluster of feelings, beliefs, and behaviors which keep a person from writing at all, or with less efficiency and effectiveness than he or she might do otherwise;[2] and by this author as a fear of the writing process that outweighs the projected gain from the ability to write.[3] These definitions are not mutually exclusive. So, though I readily acknowledge that the writing anxiety of many of my students is really only symptomatic of a life syndrome, perhaps particularly a generalized anxiety about communication, and though I eagerly agree that anxious writers exhibit specific behaviors and interactions with their environment, my tendency is to emphasize that aspect of writing anxiety which manifests itself in the group facing a teacher in the college classroom, surrounding fears about the writing process.

To identify students with anxiety about the writing process, I developed an Attitude Survey in 1978.[4] It is Likert Scale, similar to the Daly-Miller Apprehension Test. But, whereas Daly-Miller developed their test from similar tests of attitude in speech communication, the Thompson Survey items were developed from hundreds of statements reported by teachers and students during attitude discussion sessions. In these sessions, teachers and students downplayed the evaluation process while worrying more about the personal commitment inherent in the writing process. Therefore, while the Daly-Miller scale leans toward fear of evaluation, a common communication fear (1/3 of 26 items), the Thompson Survey leans toward statements describing the writer's feelings about the writing process and its consequences (2/3 of 30 items).

For the past three years I have given the Thompson Attitude Survey at the beginning of each quarter in all my classes to identify students with Writing Anxiety. I have also given the Survey at the end of the quarter to keep tabs on student improvement (the survey is always accompanied by a pre- and post-test writing sample) and to check several teaching techniques. During these three years student writing anxiety as measured by the survey has declined significantly in every class I've measured. The range of scores drops 5-9 points at either end of the range, the median score drops, and the average score drops.

During these three years, in my own classes, I have been using a language study approach to freshman composition. This means that students read about language, talk about language and then write about language. Studies I did in 1978 indicate that a language study approach signficantly reduced writing anxiety ($t=3.38$, $df-46$, p .005), and significantly improves writing ($t-4.40$, $df-46$, p .001).[5]

Lest I become too doctrinaire in my language study commitment, in 1978 I studied several other curriculum strategies: a traditional, a free organic, a self-paced, and one based on individual interviews, using the classes of four colleagues. At the 1979 CCCC I was able to report preliminarily that in all classes, regardless of teaching strategy, writing anxiety scores went down signficantly, while writing improved.[6] Scores on students from the language study curriculum descreased significantly, and the differences from other curricula were statistically significant. All the teachers involved in these studies are committed to teaching the writing process, so it seems evident also that writing anxiety can be alleviated, and writing therefore improved, if the student acquires knowledge of and skill in the workings of the writing process itself, regardless of other curriculum strategies, but that a language study approach to curriculum is significantly better for reducing writing anxiety.

Accordingly, in 1979, I designed some units of instruction

for the average college classroom, based on techniques I had been using. Four of these units have been classroom tested in classes at Northern Virginia Community College. These four units are THE WRITING PROCESS, THE PROFESSIONAL WRITER, THE LANGUAGE SITUATION, and THE INSTRUCTOR-STUDENT INTERVIEW.

I THE WRITING PROCESS
(timed for a 50-minute class)
violate the blank page (an old trick from artists)
use your "magic pen" (the one that has words in it)
write something
edit the something
organize the something
write a thesis sentence
fill in details
write a concluding sentence
polish
VOILA

II THE PROFESSIONAL WRITER
(one 50-minute class)
Read famous authors' discussion of their writing problems, habits, etc., (some quotes, and some essays from famous authors)
Class discussion; student self-evaluation of writing situation; report forms provided for students to chart their progress; teacher shares her/his own writing and writing habits with student

III THE LANGUAGE SITUATION
(one 50-minute class)
Read material on language designed to instruct students on language; some theory to alieviate student fears that there is indeed a group of bearded scholars chained to desks somewhere near Harvard formulating rules of grammar, spelling,

pronunciation, etc., for students to trip over.

IV INSTRUCTOR - STUDENT INTERVIEW
(advice to the teacher)
Tips to the teacher on how to lay a soothing hand while being the necessary critic, while eliciting information, while creating student informative material, etc.

Using these units in my own classes during Fall 1979, I discovered that the writing anxiety scores for the total population of my classes declined from a range of 64-125 to a range of 53-117; from a median of 92 to 85; and from an average of 94 to 86. ($t = 2.2$, $df = 27$, p .05). I had rather expected these results in my own classes -- after all these units were developed from my own teaching style. Then during Winter 1980, an NVCC colleague tested these units in his class. His participation was doubly interesting, because he teaches English 111/lab, a "grey area" course for those students placed into regular college English by our placement exam but with scores low enough to indicate that 2 hours of lab a week would be helpful. Joe was dubious about the first unit, especially the timing of it, but after discussing the study, the units, and the concept of writing anxiety with his students, he went ahead. He and his students became enthusiastic about the concept as the quarter progressed, even more so as they watched their writing improve and their anxiety decline. The writing anxiety, as measured by the test, was signficantly reduced from a range of 77-108 to a range of 64-92; from a median of 93 to 86; and from an average of 91 to 81 ($t = 2.56$, $df = 12$, p .05).

The teachers who have cooperated in all of these studies are well regarded by their peers, by administrators, and by their students. It seems that any good teacher in a writing classroom will reduce student writing anxiety, just because s/he is a good teacher. From my discussions with colleagues I have concluded that such teachers pursue most of these methods:

--creating an atmosphere of community in the class
--creating warm relationships with students, especially anxious ones
--using group work with students, thus creating realistic critics in addition to the teacher
--evaluating student writing realistically

My studies have also indicated to me that teachers who wished to reduce writing anxiety signficantly in their classroom so as to further improve their students' writing should include instruction material represented by the four units that have been tested.

Teaching the writing process is considered important in most recent research. This current study indicates that one important part of that process is decision making. Anxious students seem afraid of making decisions about topics, about the amount of information to gather, about generalizing from that information, about editing and proofreading. Those anxious writers also notoriously disrupt the writing process by performing parts of the process at the wrong times. They edit as they write, proofread continuously and often obsessively, and continue adding topics as they go along. The simple timed complete process in miniature seems to help these students restructure their process.

Students also benefit from knowlege about how professional writers write. Once they learn that famous writers such as Hemingway also take many hours to perfect a piece, they become less anxious about the time they spend writing. Evaluating their own process against the professionals usually helps them form new writing habits. If teachers share their own writing process while students are evaluating their process, everyone learns, and anxiety is reduced.

Anxious writers are relieved to learn that language is not static, possessed by hide-bound rules. Generous discussions about dialects, standard English, dictionaries, ape language experiments and linguistic history lends students a degree of comfort with words and structures that they have rarely experienced previously.

Finally, productive student-teacher interviews aid in reducing writing anxiety. In addition to the usual recommendations to teachers, we can add that a teacher should listen to the student's expressed anxieties about the writing process. The student will usually give clues, though perhaps not too clearly, how s/he perceives the process. The teacher can then point out how that process can be made to work more efficiently for the student.

Teachers participating in these studies have felt that surveying students by administering a pre-test for writing anxiety gives teachers an extra diagnostic tool, therefore an extra teaching tool. Studies with pre-test and post-tests on writing anxiety show that specific classroom strategies alleviate writing anxiety. Adjusting their teaching methods slightly has helped reduce student writing anxiety and improve student writing.

ENDNOTES

[1]John A. Daly and Michael D. Miller, "The Empirical Development of an Instrument to Measure Writing Apprehension," Research in the Teaching of English 10 (Winter 1975): 243.

[2]Lynn Z. Bloom and Martin Bloom, "An Empirical Study of Writing Anxiety: Its Manifestations and Reduction," paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Denver, 1978.

[3]Merle O'Rourke Thompson, "The Development and Evaluation of a Language Study Approach to a College Course in Freshman Composition" (Ph. D. Dissertation, The American University, 1978) p. 8.

[4]Ibid., pp. 77-80.

[5]Ibid., pp. 65-80.

[6]Merle O'Rourke Thompson, "A Study of Writing Anxiety: The Effects of Several Classroom Strategies," paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Minneapolis, 1979.

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